



## TEXAS'S FIRST BEEF RANCH TO BECOME BOTH AN ANIMAL RESCUE SANCTUARY AND VEGAN

**R**owdy Girl is now home to numerous animals like cows, three hogs, a pot-bellied pig, a goat, three horses and 28 ground birds including ducks. But before it was converted, it used to be a cattle farm.

Back in 2009, Renee King-Sonnen reluctantly moved from a suburbia living to a ranch outside of Houston owned by her multi-generational cattle rancher husband, Tommy Sonnen. To get Renee more involved with work around the place, her husband told her about two calves that had abandoned. *"It kind of tugged on my heartstrings because I had never had kids of my own and with these two baby calves being without a mother and needing one,"* says Renee. *"It was his way of getting in the back door of my heart."*

She bought both female calves for \$300 each. One was named Bobo while the other was named Rowdy Girl. Unfortunately, Bobo passed away young as she had something called 'failure to thrive.'

Rowdy Girl meanwhile went on to become Renee's 'vegan advocate' as she liked to call her. *"When she was a little baby she was so feisty and rowdy – that's how she got her name. She would just come bouncing*

*to me every day for her milk. When I was feeding her, something very auspicious began to happen. I was feeding her and at the same time it was like she was feeding me a line, a channel into the community of what I now know as my family, these cows. She started opening me up to seeing who they were and their connections."* She credits Rowdy Girl with inspiring her to go vegan, as Rowdy Girl gave her an insight into how cows and their calves lived.

One day she was made to help load calves onto a red trailer which would then take them to a sell barn – a place where all the local farmers and ranchers would buy and sell calves for slaughter or to become breeders. *"The mother, all these mothers of those babies – not any of the other cows, those mothers of those babies started chasing the trailer and they chased it all the way to the road. Then when the trailer took the turn to go up to the highway, those cows all took the turn with the trailer down the fence line and ran crying as far as they could until the trailer was out of sight."*

This incident, she says, broke her. Even though she was an avid yoga practitioner and had been a vegetarian in the past even going so far as to try a raw

diet for several months, she says she never made the “compassion connection” and fully understood the depth of ahimsa principles (non violence to all living beings), until this moment. What happened within her, she says was so different than anything she had felt before, but at the same time - felt so right. *“I wasn’t vegan, I just knew that what we were doing was so wrong and as I was told this is who we are and what we are as Texans, I knew I was trapped in a culture that I didn’t know how to get out of.”* Whenever the red trailer came, she would go outside while the cows were crying, get on her knees and beg for forgiveness.

She began to fight with her husband every time the red trailer came by their ranch and he pointed out that she was still eating meat. Finally in February 2014, the red trailer came by for the last time and in October of the same year, Renee went vegan. Between February and October Renee began looking up humane meat options and taking milk only from local dairies to make herself feel better. Through the process, she realized that there were no such ‘humane options’ as she watched videos of cruelty within the industry.

During a discussion with her husband on the subject, he became quiet after being asked by Renee why they didn’t slaughter their own cows for beef. He said, “Because I know them.” Renee realized that they were being hypocrites for consuming other animals and not their own. It was finally on October 31 when she chanced upon Melanie Joy’s dissertation on carnism. That evening, she refused a beef stew at her mother-in-law’s house, decided to go vegan and turned her life in the opposite direction. She also started a secret blog called the ‘Vegan Journal of a Rancher’s Wife’ to find support and get more information on her newfound belief and lifestyle, which she continues to this day to help others to become vegan.

Later that December, Renee’s husband wanted to sell off their herd of cows as they had gotten old and Renee wasn’t allowing him to sell any. In her mind, the place wasn’t a cattle ranch anymore, it was a sanctuary. Renee then realized that she could buy the herd herself and told her husband the same. Her husband then told her that he would sell her all the



cows and calves for \$30,000 when he would have been able to get them for \$40,000 at the sell barn. She was able to raise \$36,000 through an online crowd funding in less than four months.

Rowdy Girl Sanctuary officially became a registered sanctuary in February 2015, with Renee and her husband helping the 96 acres of land with the mission to not only provide a safe shelter for animals, but also to advocate and encourage other ranchers to adopt a more compassionate lifestyle.

In August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey, a category 4 hurricane with winds of 130 mph (209 kph) made its landfall in South Texas producing devastating, catastrophic, historical and life-threatening flooding over South Texas. Rowdy Girl Sanctuary is amongst those affected by this historical natural disaster. This interview was done while they are at evacuation site. All of Rowdy Girl Sanctuary’s animals remain safe and in stable condition at three different evacuation sites.

**To read more about the Sanctuary and to support them during this dire time, please visit: [www.rowdygirlsanctuary.org/](http://www.rowdygirlsanctuary.org/)**

